

# 2014 Advent Devotionals

These daily devotion have been compiled from ministers from New York and Ohio. We offer them for you use in any way that might help you connect with God this Advent season. Read them daily or when you need a little extra connection to your faith. Use them however they fit with your prayer life.

Many of these reflections have themes of waiting, expecting, and preparing. The fit right in with the hustle and bustle of our Christmas time experiences. The focus of course is the coming of the baby Jesus and what that means for our relationship with God.

We hope you find the writings provocative in thought and sustaining in your understanding of who God is.

Merry Christmas.

There seems to be a contradiction in the words of Paul. On one hand he says that the Lord is coming like a thief. On the other hand, he states that we are not in darkness so a thief coming should not surprise us.

What is it with thieves? We know that break-ins happen, and we exercise precautions to prevent them. Perhaps, this is the reason we do not expect that a break in would happen to us. Thievery is bad. It is negative. It may happen to others, somewhere else, but even thinking that it can happen to us it makes us uneasy. Therefore, we try not to think of it and hope for the best.

Yet Paul also says that the day of the Christ's coming back should not surprise us. We should prepare for it the same way we prepare for the random showing of a thief. For that occasion, we should prepare by trying to stop the break-in, but for the coming of Christ we should get ready quite differently. We should get ready to welcome this "breaking-in" of God's kingdom into this world. We should expect him as we expect someone who brings something good, instead of taking something precious away. He is bringing God's grace, new life, and God's good kingdom for us, and he will take away things unpleasant: death, suffering and desperation.

His coming still can make us uneasy in spite of its good implications, and this unease should not surprise us. His coming will bring change and change makes us humans feel uncomfortable, even if it is good change. We need to remind all that this goodness for the coming of Christ does not only bring God's anger toward sin, but it also brings the promise of forgiveness for all, for the sake of Jesus Christ.

You received God's great gifts through Christ. Show yourselves worthy for them now by displaying true humanity.

“His divine power gave us everything for life...”

Why did Jesus come? You can get into complicated theological explanations about atonement, dying and resurrection, and about “only grace, and through Christ”. You can read and debate until your head spins, but at the end you will give up debate admitting that you know nothing and understand nothing, or you can take the other path. Or you can ignore all those questions and concentrate on the baby Jesus, his sweetness and the coziness of the moment. One of these two paths will not give you satisfaction, the other path will fail to give you meaning. Peter, however, gives us a third possibility, when he explains why Jesus came. He came to give life and to give everything we need to live that Life.

Peter reminds us that when we receive true life we need to live out this true life. We need to show ourselves worthy for this life today and to his future and imminent coming by displaying true humanity. True humanity, true life will culminate in love, and this love is the answer to the love we experience through the coming of Christ. He loves us unconditionally and gives us the ability to love others the same way.

What are the limits? Where is the line we must draw, which we cannot cross? These are the questions this passage puts before us today. Jesus, in this story, draws the line. It is OK to pay your Temple tax. It is OK to exchange your money to the right currency to do so. It is OK not to “drag” that sacrificial lamb with you all the way on the road from your hometown, and buy it in Jerusalem. It is not OK to do these things inside the Temple, in the space where you are supposed to pray.

We are facing the same questions around Christmas. We celebrate the birth of God's greatest gift by giving gifts to one another, but how much gift giving and opulence is too much? What is the line, that symbolic Temple gate through which we should not carry gifts and money, through which we should only take our humble hearts, and our hands ready to serve? Where is the point where the added customs of celebration makes this season too crowded for the longing hearts to enter into God's sanctuary, because it is already filled with material goods?

Advent can be a time of Temple cleansing and creating of space for all who want to draw near to God, just as God is drawing near to us in Jesus.

Which is better? Is it better saying yes with our lips and no with our actions, or saying no with our lips and yes with our actions? The answer seems to be easy when we discuss it theoretically: Of course, the son who said no, but then later went and did the will of the father, is the one who truly obeyed.

In practice, however, it is an altogether different problem. We Christians eagerly and willingly say yes to obeying the Lord, but our actions often betray us. We often say: “So and so might be a wonderful person, who actively works on creating peace, and eagerly helps the needy, but he is not a Christian, so he will burn in hell anyway.”

According to Christ's words, it is not so. The one who obeys God's will serves God truly, and will find mercy. It is not because our deeds earn us God's forgiveness, rather our deeds show that in our souls we already accepted God's offer of grace (even if some of us do not yet know they already serve Christ) and on the outside we are already acting accordingly.

As we are expecting the coming of the One who lived and died in perfect obedience, may we learn to say “yes” to God with our words AND through our obedience in deeds.

What does it mean to grow in grace? What does it mean to grow in knowledge? Does it mean that all of us should become scholars of systematic theology? Does it mean that we should spend our days with our noses in books and ignore the plight of the world?

What does growing in grace mean? Should we thrive to get more and more of God's blessing and mercy for ourselves and just forget others?

Having your nose in books of theology is useful, because it can help you realize who really Christ is. More you read the Bible, more books you read about the Scriptures, the more you will understand that to know Christ means to follow Christ. It means to turn toward people, to hold the lives of others in higher esteem than any moralistic rule. The more grace you receive, the more you will feel, that you received God's blessing in order to pass them on.

May the knowledge and grace of Christ grow in us in this season. May we become the carriers of God's mercy, the people whose actions and love make Christ visible for all at Christmas.

This is a scary passage to hear, but it even seem inappropriate to read it around Christmas. During the Christmas season we expect words of blessing and Amos brings us words of impending doom. Yet these verses can help us to wake up from that light and tinsel induced coma in which we usually spend Advent.

What sounds to be words of impending doom is a stark reality for many people in this country. For people who live in poverty, for people whose basic rights are denied all over the world, the Christmas lights and the merriment shown on TV is only the mockery of their predicament. Ask your friends and neighbors, and you will find that it is hard for them to imagine that someone does not get presents for their children, because they cannot afford it, no matter how careful they are with money. Go into inner cities if you dare and you will find people who think that the world of bright Christmas trees and turkey dinners on nicely set tables exists only on the screen.

Amos says when we search for God's mercy and blessing in this season we may not find it through following the mad rush of shopping and decorating. This grace will shine on us truly only if we turn our faces toward the world of darkness: of poverty, injustice and hunger. The Christmas star of God's grace and forgiveness shine on us only if we become this light and blessing ourselves.

The 2014<sup>th</sup> birthday of Jesus Christ is coming. How long do we have to wait? When is that “little time” up when we can see our Savior again? Is he coming back at all?

Peter had to face the same kind of questions and doubts. Christ has come and gone already. He arrived as the infant of Christmas and left with clouds covering him from the watching eyes.

By the time Peter was writing this letter it became obvious that he wasn't coming back quickly. Moreover, the people did not see the effects of his saving sacrifice. The innocent still suffered and the guilty seemed to thrive. Some people took this as the proof that the promises of Jesus were all lies. Peter, however, instead of doubting, points to two important facts. First, God is merciful. The Lord does not want people to be lost forever, so the Lord waits like a good parent would wait for unruly children to change their behavior. Second, God's time is not our time. Even for us humans, time seems to pass at different speeds on different occasions. Sometimes a day passes fast, sometimes even an hour seems to last forever.

Imagine, says Peter, how different time is to the One who created time itself. What is a long time for us might be just a blink of an eye for God. So instead of asking, “How long do we have to wait?”, let us ask ourselves what is the right way to spend this in-between time. How should we get ready for the coming of our Lord, at Christmas and in the fullness of time?

In the Advent season we are waiting for the day of the Lord, when the power of the Almighty becomes visible and undeniable to all. We are waiting for the arrival of Jesus Christ as the one who shows who God truly is.

The contemporaries of Amos were waiting for the day of the Lord too, and Amos warned them against unfounded optimism, and against assumptions that this day would be a good day for them. The reason for this possible darkness of the Lord's day lies in the actions of Israel, and not in the will of God. They are waiting for the day of the Lord, says Amos, but their wait is tainted, their service is not truly and solely to the Lord who gave them life, home and hope. They serve other gods, they carry their star god Kaiwan. If they cannot truly serve the Lord and continue to follow idols, then the coming of God will be judgment for them. Worshiping God and worshiping stars do not go together

What does their wait and our wait today have in common? We are waiting of the coming of God's promises through Jesus, but we also try to follow other "gods" which are not truly gods. Our Christmas waiting is the tale of two stars. We are waiting for the showing of that star to the east, but we also carry other stars in our hearts. We have other "shiny gods" in our lives we admire and serve, idols we need to carry. They cannot move by themselves, because they are dead. Then there is that other star. Maybe this star of Christmas is not so shiny, not as obvious as the others, but this star leads us, carries us to the day of the Lord when forgiveness and mercy will override judgment. Are we ready to leave those other shiny objects of our lives behind and follow that one star that leads us to Christ?

When we look around in this Advent world we do not see too many things that would reflect Christ's glory for the people. Sure there are lights and there are countless items shining in the shop windows. It is true that the commercials try to entice us with glamour to buy, buy, and buy even more. God's glory, Christ's glory does not seem to be visible at all in the midst of the glory to the Mammon.

This is how it was from the beginning. Jesus came as a poor child born in a manger. He worked as a carpenter for the poor, and afterward he lived as a poor itinerant preacher, having no power according to the world. Finally he died on the cross, and his glorious resurrection was witnessed only by a handful of people.

How can his glory be seen in this world that is reluctant, even hostile when it comes to giving its glory to the true king of the world?

According to Paul, in this season of waiting for the second, and glorious coming of the Lord, we are the ones who are to show Christ's glory through our deeds. We are to give glory to Christ here by not following the crowd, rather following Him in service by feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, through smiles and joyful hearts, and through our peace in the world. While the gods of this world entice everyone to rush to gain more and to miss what is important, we are to be the ones to shine Christ's glory, the only glory, that can expel the darkness of human existence.

Yesterday's passage taught us how we need to show Jesus' glory in this Advent season. Today we are faced with a passage about the future when we, along with the whole creation, will see His glory. He will not come back as a child born humble, a teacher/healer who lived poor, but as He really is. He will come back as the one to whom all power and authority belongs.

Are we ready for that coming? Are we ready to give up the baby Jesus for the living Christ, for “Christus Victor”, who is the king of creation? Kings are usually scary, and seeing their power can feel more threatening than promises of help and defense from evil. When we are looking forward to the coming of such a king, we can also look back at His first coming and remember: the king who is coming on the clouds in the fullness of his power and the gentle babe are one and the same person. The fate of the world is in the tender hands of Jesus who is also the Christ.

This is truly good news to the world.

This is not a child. This is not a young man of 33. This is someone who is old, yet ageless, who is powerful beyond measure. John sees someone who is full of glory and expects obedience when he orders. This person “shines” with power. This is the one who has the sword that can separate truth from lies, and justice from well camouflaged oppression.

There is no wonder that many of us do not like to read this book, when such a powerful person, Jesus Christ filled with unbelievable power stares at us from its first page. We do not like to think about His coming back being like this. Yet, according to John, we are not just waiting for Him to come. He is here in the midst of us. The figure of the glorious Christ in John's vision is standing among seven lamp stands which, as it becomes obvious in the later chapters, are the congregations of the Church. Jesus came at Christmas, and will come back again at the end of this age, but he is also present in our worship and prayer, in our hymn singing and work in homeless shelters. He is among us when we comfort those who are sad, when we celebrate our joys, or when we are simply together in worship. He is here invisibly, but powerfully, just as John saw Him. Let us not forget about this in our Advent comings and goings, as we celebrate sometimes with sadness, sometimes with joy.

So there you are sitting in your car, in a restaurant, or in front of the school waiting. Did you make sure the other person knew exactly the time to meet? Is the date and time on the calendar? What will you do if they are 5 minutes late? 15 minutes late? Do you trust that they will be on time? Do you hope that they remember?

Advent is a time for waiting. A time when we remember what it was like to hope for a messiah, for “God with us”. At the same time we wait for the time when Christ will come again. Advent also gives us a time where reflect on what prayers we are waiting to be answered.

We wait with trust in God and hope that God hears our prayer. But waiting breeds uncertainty.

The Psalmist writes “In you, Lord my God, I put my trust. . . . No one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame.”

Trusting in God is the right place to put your hopes. Our trust is not that God will give us what we desire. Our trust is that God will hear us and be with us no matter where we are. Unlike waiting on a human to show up, God will be there.

It would be nice to ask for a sign in prayer and be answered. We would like the sign to be clear, concise and direct. But as culture has pointed out through books and video, a sign never turns out the way we want.

God say to Ahaz: “Ask the Lord your God for a sign”. At that time armies are marching to destroy Judah, doom is marching toward Ahaz. We don’t know why, but Ahaz doesn’t take the bait, he has the restraint to say “I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.”

God says a sign will come, but of course not how Ahaz would have expected. The answer does not come as “you will be defeated” or “you will prevail over your enemies”. Isaiah says: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”

God’s sign is hope for a future, and a future where God is with us. Things will continue. And although God is with us here God is also in that future waiting for us.

The Advent season can be one of the hardest times of the year for people. That season which our culture holds up to be the happiest and most joyful, hurts more when it doesn't live up to the hype. Death rates go up for various reasons. Economic stresses peak around this time of year. It is also a time for so many memories.

Sometimes that pain is current, raw and fresh. Sometimes the pain has been there for a long time, and will continue. Some people suffer in silence and sometimes we can tell they are suffering.

The pain of the Psalmist is different than that of what we currently experience in this country. The Psalm deals with the pain of war, and the threat of cultural extinction. But the underlying question of "why this" resonates throughout the ages.

Life is harder when there are no answers. The Psalmist calls on God to hear, restore, and save us.

God we pray that you be with those who hurt this time of year and those who cannot see joy or hope. We pray that you restore them and save them.

The covenant God made with us from the very beginning was that the Lord would be our God and we would be God's people. But God is so much different than us. It is scary to be in a relationship with a being that is all powerful. Only the priests could go near and even then only on special occasions.

But an infant we understand, a dependent child who is like us, we are used to those kinds of relationships. And through this infant the covenant will be renewed. Jesus will be the mediator in this renewed covenant. From this birth forward we will forever have God with us, on all occasions.

This new relationship will not be based on fear or punishment, but on joy and thanksgiving. This new relationship will remain unshakable.

What adjectives would you use to describe your relationship with God? Is that any different from how you would describe your relationship in the future?

How do we grow as Christians? This passage lists a logical development of a faithful life. I would say first you learn that you “have been cleansed from you past sins.” (verse 9 NIV) Then in verse 5 after you have faith you try to be “good”.

I see this with young children often. They know they believe in God so they try to be good.

To be good of course we need to learn what that means. So we try to find out what God desires from us. Armed with our knowledge of what God desires, our desire to do good, and our faith we set out. We try to learn self control, because it should be that easy.

But, in trying to control ourselves, we then learn “perseverance”. We learn how to try again. And again.

Then we learn “godliness” (verse 7). Godliness is that state when you have more than faith, and more than wanting to do what God desires, and start to understand what it means to have a God who comes down from on high to be in a relationship with you. Forgive all the junk of human life so you would just live everyday with God.

When that happens you understand that we are all in this human boat together and learn “mutual affection”. Finally you learn love.

Where do those around you get stuck? Where do you get stuck?

<sup>1</sup>Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous. Praise befits the upright.

<sup>2</sup>Praise the Lord with the lyre; make melody to him with the harp of ten strings. <sup>3</sup>Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.

As a child of the 80's I loved to watch the "hair bands" that had more hairspray than a televangelist and more spandex than is appropriate to mention in polite company. Each song had a melodic hook, a catchy chorus, and a mandatory guitar solo. These pop metal songs inspired many of us to become air guitar maestros in our bedrooms and in the car when we were sitting at a stoplight. It is truly a fun moment when the person in the car next to us at a red-light catches us jamming out and singing at the top of our lungs.

I like to imagine the joy of the Lord inspiring us to rock out to the salvation and Grace we've been given. Can we imagine the love of God grabbing our hearts and minds to such a degree that our bodies have to respond and sing in joy to the Lord? While I don't recommend breaking into an air guitar solo during worship, this text invites us to find joy in praising the Lord and to celebrate God's ongoing faithful and steadfast love.

*Lord help us know that even in the midst of grief and difficulties we have reason to rejoice because of your unconditional love for us and for all of creation. Thanks be to God. Amen*

The writer of this psalm glorifies both God's work in creation and God's work in history. On both the historical and natural stage, it is the Almighty who determines the final outcome. It is also the Lord who can ensure that this outcome is good. The psalmist confronts our expectations and our reliance on God's caring power. We trust in power and in force, or with other words, the power of one's army, and the violence of human beings. Our solutions to the world's problems are to defeat the bully with a bigger bully. God operates differently. His power does not rely on force and violence, rather on mercy, and on giving life.

The utmost expression of God's power is Jesus Christ's birth as a human being. God's powers operate through apparent weakness, and even this way, the Lord's power is greater than our powers in force and violence. The true answer to the world's problems come in a baby, who grows up to an adult healing the sick, giving dignity to the despised, the forgotten and the poor.

Our reliance on force can bring only more violence. Can we learn to operate according to God's ways, through love and care-taking? Having our eyes fixed on the manger in this season can help us to remember how greatly the Lord can act through gentleness, and enable us to act gentle.

He gives snow like wool, he scatters frost like ashes.

The movie *Frozen* has been Disney's greatest blockbuster in recent memory. We saw multiple Olafs, Elsas, and Annas during Halloween this year and YouTube has tons of "Let It Go" parodies. The movie is not only well constructed, but it deals at base with a common archetype, the search for true love. God has that true love for us and Jesus shows it in the form of his agape, or self-giving love. That true or agape love can melt a frozen heart or as the Psalmist says, scatter frost like ashes.

May we each rest in the warmth of that promise and seek to share its glow in a winter-weary world.

True love; Psalm 118:30 has the word true in it.

We all seek true love which is the agape love of Jesus

It can melt a frozen heart

When Jesus Christ arrived into the world the people of Israel were truly crying out of the depth to God. They were suffering under a new invader, which didn't know and did not want to know God. The Romans did not mind if Israel worshiped the one and only Lord, as long as the Jewish people allowed Roman religious insignia in to the Temple. They were at the point of losing their independence again and close to the Holy Temple becoming defiled.

God heard their prayers and gave them salvation, just not the kind of salvation they expected. They wanted political freedom, and they received the freedom of the heart. They wanted the country purged from invaders and God gave them the possibility of cleansing their lives. The Lord fulfilled what the Lord promised through the Old Testament prophets, giving the Israelites true freedom to serve God and making all the nations of the earth come to God through Christ.

What turmoil is in your life that you are praying that God will save you from? When salvation arrives much greater, with a much broader scope, than we expected it, can we recognize that salvation and celebrate it? Or are we going to cry that God did not answer our prayers exactly the way we wanted?

“So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.” (Gal 3:26) This whole passage expresses the depth of God's salvation through Christ for us. This one verse describes its practical effect in our lives poignantly. When Christ came and fulfilled his mission, the forgiveness of sins and the salvation he brought was valid for the whole of humanity and the whole of creation. We all are children of God, regardless to culture, race, social standing, gender or sex. In this Advent season, however, it is hard to see us as one happy family of humanity. There is too many conflicts, too much mistrust, too much trying to find a better position over others in our society. There is too much “I may be a sinner but I am not as bad as you are.”

According to Paul, when Christ came the dividing walls between humans fell down. They fell down because Christ brought down the wall that separated us from the Almighty. Why are these walls still standing? If God made them obsolete then what keeps them up?

In this Advent we need to ask what can we do to bring the walls down? We need to stop pointing out how the other side (other cultures, other denominations, people thinking differently than us) are complicit in this ungodly separation. We truly and honestly have to look at what we can do to further the coming of God's kingdom and then do it!

This psalm is a great example of a true prayer. It starts out with the concern of the individual and out of this concern grows the care for the whole of the people. As if during the prayer, the eyes of the person praying were opened and saw anyone who is concerned about individual salvation also has to be concerned with saving the whole of the people. This mirrors God's saving purposes. God loves the whole world and each and every one of us in it, regardless whether our sins are great or small.

When we look forward to see the Christmas child, this is a truth worth to remember. We are preparing to the coming of Jesus Christ, who can take away our sins and save us. We tend not to think about the fact that he comes to offer salvation to all, even to those whom we do not like. Our Advent path and our prayers should be like this psalm. It can start out with our hopes and concerns, but it will not be true to the will of the merciful and loving God if this pilgrimage does not end with concern for everyone and with our opening up toward the whole of creation.

This is why we should pray with the psalmist today: "Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior."

What if? What if God answered when we asked for something? What if the Lord appeared when we really wanted his presence? Would we really be happy? We say “yes”, but is that so?

It was not so in the case of Zechariah. He went in to the Holy of Holies, where God was supposed to be present, yet he was surprised, moreover, he doubted when he found the messenger of God. Does it surprise us when we meet with God where God has promised to be?

One of these times and places is the Christmas season. We have our little “rituals” of how we spend this time waiting for the coming of Jesus. We have our expectations how this season should be, and we are disbelieving when the Christ child appears in the midst of our human customs. This is the season when we expect the extraordinary, God coming as human. Can we bear it when it really happens? Can we answer God's promises and God's presence the right way, or are we like Zechariah the priest, who just couldn't deal with the Good News?

The song of Hanna is the response to another long awaited birth, another unexpected child. Hanna was childless and suffered a lot for that in her culture. Her culture and society measured the worth of a woman through the number of sons she had. She sings this song in response to the promise that she will not only have a son, but this son will also be a great prophet of the Lord. She was hoping for ordinary blessing and now she receives a much greater honor through the birth of Samuel.

Today we eagerly await the coming of another child who will bring this reversal of fortunes for not only her mother, but also for the whole of humanity and the whole of creation. It is not by mistake the song of Mary recorded by Luke blesses God for similar reasons.

At Christmas we can expect the reversal of our fortunes. We may feel blessed in our lives. Maybe we are wealthy, and maybe we do not suffer, but deep down we know that in the eyes of God, in the judgment of the Lord we fall short. We are poor, and miserable, and worthy of condemnation. The joy of Hannah can be our joy in this season if we search for true wealth, health and blessedness, which comes only through the birth of Christ.

## Christmas Eve

We celebrate tonight in churches, watching kids perform the nativity, or with candle light services at midnight, wrapped in the beauty and warmth of the moment. There is no question in our mind that the Christmas events are good. This was not so at the actual birth of Christ. Human morals, and even the laws of the Old Testament seemed to collide with actual events. These human morals and Old Testament laws were condemning Mary, whom we celebrate as the symbol of obedience to God.

On the surface she seemed to be a woman who broke rules, and now was having a child out of wedlock. As such, the judgment on her could have been death. Joseph was a good man, but even he could not see beyond the possible human explanations. He was getting ready to send Mary away in secret in order to save her life. It took a messenger from God to make Joseph see the Christmas events for what they really were: not human indiscretion, rather the fulfillment of God's salvation.

Today, we often have the same problem. What seems to be natural, and moral to us, often collides with the will of God, because the will of God is not about morals. It is about salvation, love and mercy toward all humans. Let us look at the manger on this Christmas Eve, and remember its "scandal". Let us now look at the world, and see what are the events out there that we may find scandalous, yet are really the signs of God's love and mercy in action.



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Rev. Berlik was ordained in Hungary 19 years ago. After serving as pastor to several churches and a church run nursing home Viktoria came to the United States. She has served churches in Indiana, Pennsylvania, and New York. She currently serves on the Committee on Ministry for the Presbytery of Genesee Valley. She enjoys studying theology and knitting.



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